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ABSTRACT

This document analyzes the inspection reports of the five further education (FE) colleges in Britain that have achieved a grade of 1 for quality assurance (QA), identifies key lessons for the improvement of programs in other FE colleges, and refers to helpful FE publications. The five colleges consisted of two general FE colleges, one sixth-form college, one tertiary college, and one agricultural and horticultural college. The colleges represented a mix of rural, urban, and suburban schools with enrollments ranging from 950 to more than 23,000 students. The central focus of their QA systems also differed. Despite their differences, all five colleges shared a number of characteristics, which included strategic clarity; systematic approach to planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation; commitment to quality improvement; comprehensive QA system; clearly understood lines of responsibility/accountability; systematic review, action planning, and monitoring of all aspects of provision; and commitment to staff development. It was recommended that other FE colleges desiring to improve their QA grade adopt a systematic approach to QA at the operational level and also give consideration to the following items at the strategic level: culture, processes and systems, developing the capability of the human resource, and organizational structure. (Contains eight references and six acknowledgements.) (MN)

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Quality assurance in colleges

The Chief Inspector's Annual Report 1993-1994 (FEFC, 1994) shows that in that year a lower percentage of colleges gained the highest grade in quality assurance than for any other aspect of colleges inspected in England.

'In many cases, quality assurance procedures are inconsistently applied and under-developed management information systems inhibit the systematic use of performance indicators.' (paragraph 58)

This publication:

- analyses the inspection reports of those colleges that have achieved a grade 1 for quality assurance
- identifies the key lessons for the development of such systems in colleges generally
- makes reference to FEU and FEDA publications which might help

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How they differ

At the time of writing only five colleges had achieved a grade 1 for quality assurance in English colleges. The colleges considered differed considerably in the following ways:

1. In the type of institution.

   Of the five there were:

   - two general FE colleges (Canterbury College and Swindon College)
   - a selective sixth-form college (Greenhead College)
   - a tertiary college (Knowsley Community College)
   - an agricultural and horticultural college (Bishop Burton College)

2. In size they varied from a college with 950 full-time students to a college with over 6000 students, of whom over 3000 were full-time, and another with over 23,000 students, of whom over 2,350 were full-time.

3. The locations ranged from rural to urban and from suburban to inner city and were in different areas of the country.

Given these considerable differences, it is not surprising that the central focus of their quality assurance system differed. These were:

- Total Quality Management (TQM) and rigorous performance review
- quality policy and manual; standard and target setting; systematic review, evaluation and action planning; internal quality audit; Investors in People (IIP)
- value-added analyses used to measure student and staff performance
- IIP; standards and quality teams
- collection of student feedback; a procedures manual; systematic review of courses and customer services; action planning and monitoring progress; a quality course manual; and 'improver groups'

It must be difficult to find such diversity in a sample of five colleges in the FE sector. In addition to being of different size, type and location, they even varied in the ways they tackled that aspect of their provision for which they were selected: the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. The obvious conclusion is that there is unlikely to be only one solution to quality assurance in colleges. This is a thesis described in more detail in *Making Quality Your Own* (FEU, 1995).

This publication outlined the range of general quality models or approaches available and some of the specific improvement techniques associated with them. It argued that colleges need to decide for themselves what quality means for them and to choose approaches to quality which meet their own strategic priorities and requirements, which may change over time.

Interestingly, of the five college inspection reports in question, only three mention the general quality approaches that are TQM and IIP. At the same time, however, other techniques are also mentioned. This suggests that some aspects of the various approaches are complementary. Once a college has developed its own system, it is easy enough to modify it to meet the requirements of a particular kitemark, if that is what it chooses to do. Colleges in this small sample have indeed made quality their own.

What they share

It would be a mistake to assume that these five colleges have nothing in common. Despite the differences outlined above, they share a great many characteristics. These included:

- strategic clarity. All of the colleges were clear about their mission and the direction in which they wished to develop. What quality meant in the context of each college was also apparent
- clearly stated strategic and operational objectives, which are understood and shared
- a systematic approach to planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation
- a commitment to quality improvement
- an understanding that the consistent and systematic collection and analysis of data is a necessary prerequisite of quality improvement
- a comprehensive quality assurance system which operates consistently across the college

> 'The quality assurance system is comprehensive and effective, and integrates well with the organisational structure of the college.' (Knowsley College)

- agreed quality characteristics, standards and target setting, often linked to the college charter
- clearly understood lines of responsibility and accountability, together with a sense of general ownership of the quality improvement process, particularly at course team level and often also including students

> '...students comment that their views are carefully considered and that action is taken where possible.' (Bishop Burton College)

- systematic review, action planning and monitoring implementation of all aspects of provision, now increasingly linked to self assessment
- a commitment to staff development, with explicit links made between strategic objectives, appraisal and performance review

> '...staff development...is formally linked to institutional plans and to the college staff-appraisal scheme.' (Swindon College)

In addition to these similarities, it was striking that all of the colleges also achieved grades 1 or 2 for governance and management.

In this section of the reports reference was frequently made to:

- effective leadership, the style of which was often said to be consultative
- a clearly articulated college mission statement, to which there was general commitment
- systematic approaches to strategic and operational planning

> 'The strategic planning process is consultative and systematic.' (Greenhead College)

- good communication between governors, managers, staff and students
- efficient management information systems, the information from which is presented in user-friendly ways and is used to inform management decisions, or at the very least a strategy to put these in place
- clear and effective decision making
- effective organisational structures

Given that many colleges are only now setting up systematic quality assurance systems, there may be a time lag between having such a system in place

and quality improvement becoming apparent. Nonetheless, in the colleges under consideration, none achieved lower than grade 3 for any programme area. Together 23% of their programme areas gained grade 1; 57% grade 2; and 20% grade 3. This is higher than the national average in 1993-4.

Another intriguing characteristic the colleges share is that they all had Average Levels of Funding (ALF) which were lower than the average in 1993-4. Greenhead College was the closest to the average for its college type, while Knowsley and Swindon were the furthest below theirs. While the sample is too small from which to generalise, these are interesting findings and, at the very least, suggest the relationship between ALF and quality is not straightforward.

Conclusions and general messages

What emerges from this analysis of the five colleges is a sense of coherent quality systems integrated into strategic and operational planning cycles. Quality systems in colleges have often developed ad hoc, with practices evolving without reference to each other or to a common understanding of what quality means in the context of the particular college and its mission. The result is patchy and inconsistent practice.

Colleges need to:

- start with their mission and strategic objectives
- use these to define what quality means for them, taking into account the needs of
  - — students and other customers
  - — external stakeholders responsible for funding, inspection and validation
  - — their own professional standards

Thereafter at the operational level they need to:

- identify the aspects of the college to be quality assured (perhaps the seven aspects of colleges identified in *Assessing Achievement*, FEFC circular 93/28)
- for each, identify quality criteria, characteristics or desired features (with reference to their own definition of quality and the requirements of external agencies, including the criteria in *Assessing Achievement*)
- from these, identify quality standards (see *Continuous Improvement and Quality Standards*, FEU, 1993, for a definition of standards and how to develop them)
- decide what information and data need to be gathered in order to show that the standards have been achieved

  It is possible that there will be gaps in the data: that is to say that some aspects of the college are not fully covered. Equally it is possible that in some areas there is duplication of data. In general, there is a tendency to collect too much data and make insufficient use of it. It is important to gather data for a specific purpose and to ensure that data collection is cost effective.

- set up a system to collect the data, analyse it, identify priority areas for action, and set improvement targets
- ensure that action plans for improvement are drawn up, monitored and evaluated. This will be summarised in the annual self-assessment report (see *The Preparation of Self-Assessment Reports*, FEU, 1995)
- ensure that the messages are used to inform planning

Evidence of much of this is to be found in the inspection reports of the five colleges.

In addition to adopting a systematic approach to quality assurance at the

operational level, *Making Quality Your Own* argues that attention needs to be given at the strategic level to:

- culture
- processes and systems
- developing the capability of the human resource
- organisational structure

These broader themes, too, are reflected in the inspection reports. A commitment to a culture of continuous improvement is mentioned frequently. One example of this in practice comes from the report for Canterbury College:

> 'Criteria for judging success are clearly laid out in the appraisal documentation and the system encourages openness. Staff speak frankly and confidently of their own development needs.'

This quotation could equally be seen as evidence of the college effectively developing the capabilities of its staff.

Key processes are less frequently mentioned in the reports, but the systems designed to manage them are. It is likely that, when key processes and systems are identified and clarified, effective organisational structures based upon them can be developed.

The five colleges being considered are very different and yet their inspection reports demonstrate that they have each found effective ways of bringing together many of the practices outlined in this publication. There is a sense of coherence about them as institutions: they know clearly what they are and where they want to be and their activities are purposeful and systematic in helping them achieve that vision. Quality assurance and improvement is a central feature of their development.

FEDA plans to undertake further work to develop a series of linked papers and seminars on the following aspects of quality:

- the development of coherent quality assurance systems
- self assessment and quality improvement
- effective post-assessment action planning
- developing and using charters
- strategic approaches to quality: processes, culture, human resources and structure

References

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